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AUTHOR Hsu, Vivian
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an experiment carried out by the Chinese language program at Oberlin College to use play production as a means of teaching spoken Chinese. The experiment was inspired by the fact that teaching spoken Chinese cannot be solved by traditional classroom methods, particularly at the intermediate level. The lack of texts, the inadequacy of existing texts, the low morale of intermediate students and the difficulty in creating native environment for learning Chinese are factors that justify the use of play production. Play production puts dialogues into a situation that simulates life, the project itself providing an environment which requires verbal communication and mutual cooperation. The tedium and boredom of language learning can be avoided, and the promise of recognition creates a further incentive. But to carry out such a project, one must first obtain a suitable play, by simplifying an existing one, adapting a short story or writing an original play. Once a play is obtained, one must assemble a staff capable of directing the production and get the cooperation of the students. The next steps involve familiarizing the students with the text through discussion, assigning and learning roles, rehearsals and performance. Each of these steps is discussed with specific reference to the Oberlin experience. (CLK)

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PLAY PRODUCTION AS A MEDIUM FOR LEARNING SPOKEN CHINESE

Vivian Hsu
Oberlin College

For the past two years, the Chinese language program at Oberlin College has experimented with play production as a means for teaching spoken Chinese. The impetus for this project arose out of a feeling that teaching spoken Chinese, particularly at the intermediate level, presents certain problems that cannot be solved by traditional classroom methods.

The first problem is the lack of good texts for spoken Chinese. There is a number of texts available which are pedagogically sound, which introduce basic vocabulary and sentence structures in appropriate ways. However, none of them has recreated in their dialogues interesting live situations with which the student can identify. As a result, the student is not stimulated to apply the content of the texts to his live Chinese conversation. The dialogues in the texts are not absorbed and re-enacted in life.

Secondly, the lack of good texts is not to be blamed for everything. Even if there were a text which contained interesting dialogues, using vital vocabulary, and covering topics exciting and relevant to the student, the student is still likely to associate those dialogues with the printed page. Therefore, we must recognize the fact that textbooks are an unnatural medium for acquiring a spoken language. Textbooks can be an invaluable aid in learning a spoken language, but if used alone, they rarely bring success. The ideal conditions for language acquisition are available in the native country, or an environment where the target language is spoken as the native language. In such an environment, the language is spoken in natural contexts and the student has extensive exposure to it.

This brings us to the third problem, that is, it is virtually impossible to recreate a native environment in the United States, especially in areas where the population of standard Chinese speakers is very sparse.

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A fourth problem, peculiar to intermediate students is that their morale tends to be quite low. In their first year of study, students generally attack the difficulties of the language with unrestrained gusto. By the second year, just as some of their initial enthusiasm has worn off, they realize that in spite of having expended a great amount of time and effort in studying Chinese, they are still unable to carry on a simple but somewhat substantive conversation. Discouragement and frustration then set in. Those students who can overcome this so-called "sophomore slump" will find in their third year of study a renewed faith that Chinese can be conquered. They will discover, perhaps to their own surprise, that they can handle some rather interesting and stimulating materials in Chinese, even some works by modern writers which have not been doctored up--or "down" rather--to their level. However, the second year slump is a real phenomenon. And with the traditional resources, many students are unable to bridge the awkward gap between the enthusiasm of the first year and the achieved competence of the third.

The play format was attempted at Oberlin to solve in part the problems outlined above in a new and creative way. The format affords the following advantages:

1) It lifts the dialogues out from the written page and into a situation that simulates life.
2) Aside from bringing the script to life, the group project itself is a life situation which requires much verbal communication, all of which is carried out in Chinese. The play is not only read, but also memorized, discussed, rehearsed, and performed, all in Chinese. The entire process embodies innumerable spontaneous situations for Chinese conversation. To facilitate conversation, the group learns at the outset a list of play terminology--called 話劇常用語句

Thus, the play format provides not only much more life-like, but also much more extensive, exposure to spoken Chinese than the textbook method.

3) Given a humorous play with a theme relevant to modern American students, much of the tediousness and boredom of learning Chinese is removed. Any Chinese teacher would admit that memorization is the best way to internalize vocabulary and sentence structure. But how many of us have been successful in convincing our students of the value of memorization; and of those students who see the value of such an exercise, how many have done it ungrudgingly? The play format not only provides lively conversation for memorization, but also a truly worthy goal for the exercise. Therefore, it is a relatively painless way for students to internalize vocabulary and sentence structure. Even if the script does not contain any new vocabulary and sentence structures to be learned, the repetition at rehearsals will transform the superficial level of passive knowledge to a deep level of active knowledge.

4) One of the most effective incentives in any task is the promise of recognition. There is a bit of the exhibitionist in almost every person. To have an opportunity to display one's ability in Chinese, and to be recognized by an audience of one's teachers and peers inevitably boosts the student's incentive to perform well in speaking Chinese. Furthermore, success in the performance heightens the students' confidence and removes much of the feeling of inadequacy and frustration often experienced by the intermediate student.

5) The play format gives the group of students a common challenge, one which demands much mutual cooperation and leaves no room for detrimental competition. It forces

students to help each other without creating a superior-inferior relationship. As a result, the feeling of camaraderie among the students is greatly enhanced, which in turn heightens the morale of the class. Finally, producing a play is a tremendously fun, though also demanding experience.

Having recognized the pedagogical value of play production, how does one go about the project? First, one must have a play to produce. The play must be one which employs vital modern vocabulary in the standard idiom. It should not be overly difficult for the intermediate student. The number of roles in the play should roughly correspond with the number of students, and the sizes of the roles should be fairly balanced to give the students more or less equal opportunity to display their speaking ability. And ideally, its theme should be one which is relevant and stimulating to modern American students. It also should not be overly serious. For after all, a play performed by a cast of total novices would be quite unprofessional. Given a serious play the performance could easily become a disaster. The play also should be of manageable length. To us this meant a play lasting 45 minutes or so. It is virtually impossible to find a readily available play which satisfies all the above requirements. In order to have a play suitable to our purpose, one of three approaches must be taken: (1) to rewrite and simplify an existing play, (2) to adapt a short story, (3) to write a play tailored to our needs.

At Oberlin we chose the third route. The first year we conned a writer friend of ours to write a play along the lines of our specific requirements, plus a rough theme and plot. The result was 「皆大歡喜」, translated as "Everything is Just Great." The play focused upon conflicts within a Chinese family. Reminiscent of "Fiddler on the Roof," the main character who epitomizes classism, moralism and conservatism, is one who must adjust to changing

times. The traffic is too heavy, of his three daughters, the oldest has married an American, the second has fallen in love with one, and the youngest is becoming a wild teeny-bopper. On top of this, his wife always seems to side with his daughters. The turn of events occurs when, at a melodramatic moment, his wife is hit by a motorcycle. After it is discovered that the American boyfriend of his second daughter has given blood for a transfusion which saved his wife's life, the father undergoes a change of attitude. He now accepts the Americans into his family circle and "Everything is just great."

The second play we produced was written by our graduate Chinese teaching assistant. Entitled 「校園新苗」, "Going Home" in English, the play focuses on the struggle of college-age Chinese Americans, caught in the conflicts between traditional Chinese and radical American values. The play begins with the main character, Ma-Li, espousing radical feminism. After several mishaps--a broken romance with a down-to-earth Chinese student, alienation from her parents, an unexpected pregnancy, drop-out from college, and lastly, walk-out by the father of her child, Ma-Li finally "came home." At the end of the play, the characters speak with truly Chinese voices against extremism and a world view that make complementary forces into polar opposites, setting dichotomies (male/female, traditional, modern, even parents/children) that deny the essential harmony of things. Throughout the play there is injected the idea that we mustn't take all this too seriously-別借題發揮了,問題越談越大! "Honestly, don't pick a pretext to make a big speech. The more you guys talk about it, the bigger the problem gets."

Well, in my opinion, it is this type of play that would serve our pedagogical purpose the best. It is my hope that more of these plays will be written and made available for use through publication.

Having obtained a play, one must attack a second hurdle--that is, getting a staff that is willing and able to direct the project. The effort of a single dedicated instructor is not nearly enough. At Oberlin, we are fortunate in having a small group of Chinese-speaking people who are interested and who have some know-how in play production.

A third hurdle is getting the cooperation of students. Many students would initially find the idea of acting in a play terribly formidable. Some are certain at first that they will get stage fright and make a fool of themselves. Even with students who are gungho about acting in a play, they may not have the time to devote to such a project. At Oberlin, we solved the latter problem by making the play production a part of a course. That is, academic credit was given for participation. Since we believe students learn as much spoken Chinese in such a project as in a conversation class, we had no problem justifying giving academic credit for it. As for the students' fear of acting, it is assuaged by the assurance that the audience will be their peers and most of them will not know Chinese.

At Oberlin we performed the plays in a lounge which seats 70, mostly on the floor. The atmosphere is quite informal. Although the entire project culminates in the performance and the performance is the rationale for the project, the prime importance of the project is not in the performance, but in the learning process. With this understanding, much of the tension associated with the performance is lifted.

Having obtained a play, a willing and able staff of directors, and a group of enthusiastic students, we proceeded in the following way:

1) We read and discussed the play in a series of seminars. This took roughly 8 to 10 one hour sessions. The goals here would be to familiarize the participants with the text, to clarify the considerable use of colloquialisms and slang, and to permit discussion of plot, characterization, etc. These sessions would readily lend themselves

to a normal classroom structure--the key requirement being, as always, that Chinese be the exclusive medium for the discussions.

2) After a few sessions into this initial phase, roles may be assigned. At this point the second phase of individual tutoring in the roles would begin. Each students would develop his role with the aid of a tutor with emphasis on fluency of speech, accuracy of tones, and expression. Audio tapes will be particularly useful to students in memorizing their parts and in mastering the intricacies of inflection and expression. Tapes, however, should not be considered a substitute for the individual role-tutor. The tutor can and should go beyond the simple inducement to repetition, and should encourage conversation and discussion of the role--a critical function in the overall process. Students who appear together in the play should be encouraged to develop their parts together at this stage.

3) The third phase is rehearsing the play. Rehearsals conducted in Chinese will not only permit practice in the particular vocabulary and language of the play, but will also provide practice in all aspects of spoken Chinese--especially in command or direction usage not commonly covered in classroom situations. Furthermore, the practice is applied to a functional situation and not some imaginary and unlikely situation out of a textbook. Near the end of the rehearsal phase, a video tape of a dress rehearsal was made. The tape proved to be an invaluable asset for students in their critical evaluation of their own work.

4) The rehearsals culminated in a performance of the play. In communities like Oberlin, a Chinese speaking audience is difficult to scrounge up. In fact, the bulk of the

audience knew no Chinese. In both productions a synopsis of the play was provided on the program to enhance the enjoyment of those who did not understand Chinese. In the second production, subtitles were provided on a screen, and the language barrier was successfully bridged.

In summary, play production can be an effective component of a Chinese language program, particulary for teaching spoken Chinese. The key to its success lies in the teaching staff's dedication and generosity in terms of time and energy, the students' enthusiasm, and a large dose of good luck.